

Perspective

How and where to de-westernize media research?

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The paper raises the question of de-Westernization in media research, with respect to developing countries in general and India in particular. The writer argues that bridging of the urban-rural division is the first step towards de-Westernization. He considers climate change as one subject where de-Westernization is felt and understood even by the Indian elite, and the urban-rural divide vanishes in most climate change discourses. Climate change opens up opportunities. Climate change communication is now the flagship of development communication, in an era when development has suffered a setback. The need for media research to go and contribute beyond the academic world is stressed.

Key words: Cultural shock, RTI, media, journalism, media research, de-Westernization, climate change, science communication

REVERSE CULTURAL SHOCK

Let me start with the three rhetoric questions an “expert” posed in my interview to my job as a media faculty member in Anna University, Chennai, India, in the year 2006:

“You say, the media is a social institution!”

“Agenda setting theory! Is it a theory?”

“How do you say media violence does not have a powerful effect on all children?”

After serving 17 years with *The Hindu* newspaper and having been a post-doctoral fellow at the London School of Economics (LSE), I applied for a Professor position in Anna University in 2006. Oddly, there was not a single question on my lecture presentation on Manufacturing Consent and Public Sphercules – relating them to conflict and media, the topic of my interview presentation. The expert woman who interviewed me was obviously saying that my statements “media is a social institution”, “agenda-setting theory is a theory”, and “media violence only has selective impacts on various categories of children” are wrong. I could not talk back in the circumstance of the job interview. The story did not end there. The Director of a Doordarshan TV centre who was also in the interview committee followed up. He advised me:

“It is not enough studying in London. You should understand the grassroots reality by visiting our Indian villages.”

I kept quiet wondering whether or not to treat it as a *sardarji* (Sikh) joke, he being a Sikh with a turban on his head! (Sardarji jokes are popular among South Asians). The fact is that I had my schooling in a rural area and I have been visiting villages as often as possible ever since to be in touch with the changing dynamics of our rural India. Just because I had landed up from London to appear for the interview does not mean that I did not know the grassroots reality of India.

Of course, the woman expert in the interview committee later made one sensible point that I cannot be given a Professor position directly because I have not met the academic requirement of having produced a doctorate under my supervision. Yes, I agree and accepted for a position next to that of Professor with a higher pay start in 2006. But then, I later learned that the smart woman had managed to occupy a Professor chair in a university before producing a doctorate herself!

You may think that the above three paragraphs are classified information. But then, the Right to Information Act, 2005, that revolutionized free flow of information authorizes me to reveal this information.

In Discourse Analysis as a research methodology, we say and identify the different types of texts that can produce the same discourse. I am trying to forget Michel Foucault, a great name in London School of Economics (LSE) scholarship as I am now in the Indian backyard, but I will not forget what he has to say: the dominant group describes what knowledge is and it sometimes discards knowledge of others that does not suit the group

interests. It is not surprising that the Vice-Chancellor of Pondicherry University at least has taken Foucault's ideas seriously and has made a counter discourse. Since he could not get good media academics through the formal process of job interview with the vested interests of the interview committee, he chose a meritorious media academic unilaterally (without asking her to face an interview board of experts) and appointed her Reader and Head in a regular vacancy!

Returning from the London School of Economics, it was a reverse cultural shock. And I learnt to unlearn, and de-Westernize! No more, I speak of Manufacturing Consent, Public Sphercules, and the like. What is the point in speaking of things which people do not understand? And I am not of the type who talks of alien things just to prove that I am cut above the rest.

SKILL VERSUS PROCESS

There is a division between skill and process. In most developed countries the division is sharp. But in India and other developing countries, we mix up both and, at times, mess up completely. Most of our degrees combine skill and process. 'Skill' means imparting practical training to be a good communicator. 'Process' means analyzing the impact of the media by exercising critical thinking.

Some of the nomenclatures of our master's degree programmes in India are as follows:

- (i) M.A., M.J.M.C., M.S. (Journalism / Communication) - print media
- (ii) M.Sc. (Visual Communication) – drawing plus television
- (iii) M.Sc. (Electronic Media) – television, radio, the internet
- (iv) M.Sc. (Science and Technology Communication) - print, radio, TV, internet with a science tilt.

Even in India, there are 'process' degrees. One such example is M.A. (Media Governance) run by the Centre for Culture, Media and Governance in Jamia Millia Islamia. But the same university's A.J. Kidwai Mass Communication and Research Centre run skill-oriented degrees – M.A. (Mass Communication) and M.A. (Convergent Journalism).

As I said earlier, the division is sharper in developed countries. If you take, City University, London, its Department of Journalism runs the following skill-oriented degree programmes and they focus on practice:

- (i) M.A. (Broadcast Journalism/Television Journalism)
- (ii) M.A. (Interactive Journalism)
- (iii) M.A. (Investigative Journalism)
- (iv) M.A. (Magazine Journalism)
- (v) M.A. (Newspaper Journalism)
- (vi) M.A. (Financial Journalism)

- (vii) M.A. (Science Journalism)
- (viii) M.A. (International Journalism)
- (ix) M.A. (Political Journalism)

On the other hand, City University, London, runs the following process (or critique) oriented degree programmes through its Department of Sociology:

- (i) M.A. (International Communications and Development)
- (ii) M.A. (Media and Communications)
- (iii) M.A. (Political Communication)
- (v) M.A. (Transnational Media and Globalisation)
- (vi) M.Sc. (Information, Communication and Society)

In spite of limited diversity in media degree programmes available even in India, most students do not read media academic books and journals. Our department library has a good number of media academic books though it does not subscribe to any media journal. All said and done, most students read only Kumar's (2007) *Mass Communication in India* or any such book which gives everything in mass communication in a nutshell in an easily digestible form. Kumar may have regrets that he retired as Reader in the University of Pune not able to become a Professor, but he can be happy that he is the most read media academic in India. I have tried my best to make my students read McQuail's (2005) *Mass Communication Theory* but failed. The book is internationally well read is another matter. But then, most of my university's media students are very successful in the job market. May be, we still go by the *gurukula* system (traditional Indian system) of teachers transferring information through oral discourses rather than book reading!

DO WE HAVE A PERSPECTIVE?

Where is an Indian perspective? We hardly have process-oriented degree programmes. This is because 'process' hardly gets jobs in developing countries. Madurai Kamaraj University's Department of Sociology had to wind up its M.A. (Development Communication) for this very reason. We have skill-oriented degrees but which also incorporate a good amount of process. We have teachers and researchers in most media departments with little experience as media professionals. We also lack finance, unless in case of central universities or posh private colleges/universities. Even central universities go in for strict academic qualifications and in the process fail to take in people with good media expertise.

Can we balance practice and process? How many Indian researchers have read *Milestones in Mass Communication Research* edited by Lowery and DeFleur (1988) or other literature to differ from the West? If we differ from the West, what is Indianness in media

discipline? First of all, which research methods are original to media studies as a discipline? Most scholars have come from sociology, psychology, political science, education, language studies, etc. Methods have come from different disciplines – be it survey, experimental design, focus group discussion, or discourse analysis.

Are we going to still uphold the magic bullet theory discarded in a study on the 'Invasion from Mars' radio programme in 1938? The magic bullet theory supports 'powerful effects' as opposed to 'limited effects'. Decades later, Hall (1982) subtly contested the 'limited effects' school of thinking. Hall talks about oppositional reading of the text. Emphasis is on audience reception, and on texts being open to more than one reading. Meaning does not lie in the text alone. People bring their identities to their reading of the content of the media.

The Institute for Social Research was established in Frankfurt in 1923, and that emerged as Frankfurt School. The classical Marxist notion of the 'culture industry', associated with the first generation writers of the Frankfurt School, still lingers with media academia. Classical Marxism proposed an opposition between superstructure and economic base. Superstructure covered culture. Base meant the economic substructure, the mode of production and the dominant economic class.

According to Frankfurt School, mass media follows the ideological interests of the dominant class in society. The media is seen as integrated into the existing economic and political elites and reflecting their interests. The classical Marxist view sees one class as manipulating the media's content. Frankfurt School (Critical theory) writers argue that the modern mass media impeded the proletariat's ability to create socialist political consciousness. Of course, later writers from Frankfurt School differed from such a view.

In the last two decades, the classical Marxist view of the media is easily challenged by the liberalization and consumerism. New approaches to the media are needed. But, are we prepared for that? Are we acquainted with liberalization discourses so as to incorporate them in media studies?

NEED FOR TRIANGULATION

If more than two methods are used in a study to double (or triple) checking results, it is called triangulation. This is also called "cross examination". This minimizes inadequacies of single-source research. This is not only aimed at validation but also at deepening and widening of one's understanding. Weakness of one method will be compensated by another method. For instance, answers got from an 'interview' may be cross-checked by 'observation', because one may say one thing in an interview but do something contrary to that in practice.

Sometimes, interviews may be supplemented by participant observation, a method got from

anthropologists. White's (1950) study of newsroom practice – one of the studies that helped develop the concept of "gatekeeping" in the newsroom – was conducted by the researcher sitting at the elbow of newspaper editors and observing their work from an "insider" perspective. He points out that gatekeepers play very crucial roles in making the decision between "in" or "out". Have we progressed beyond this in terms of innovation in methodology, in this new century? Can we treat media research in isolation?

INTER-DISCIPLINARY

To what extent, media scholars should intervene and have grip in the thematic areas such as climate change, politics, and gender, which form a main variable of research? When our research is basically inter-disciplinary, should not we be strong in subjects we intervene? Is isolation all right? Let us say I specialize in environmental communication, do I have the courage to present papers in environmental science conferences? If yes, is it right on my part to give an excuse that "I am not a scientist" when basic questions are asked? After all, LSE economist Nicholas Stern's review on climate change is a hit.

If you wish to de-Westernize in your research, one way of doing it is to deal with the Eastern issues rather than departing from the West in aspects such as methodology.

For instance, here are two points from the codes for environment journalists prepared at the International Federation of Environmental Journalists (IFEJ) held in Colombo, Sri Lanka, in 1998:

(i) By informing the public, the journalist plays a vital role in enabling people to take actions to protect the environment. The journalist's duty is not only to alert people about threats to the environment but also to follow up on such threats with additional reporting. Journalists should also write about possible solutions to environmental problems.

(ii) Journalists should cite the sources of their information and avoid alarmist, speculative and biased reporting. Journalists should cross-check the authenticity and accuracy of information provided by all sources.

Such professional codes, if incorporated in research, would also help de-Westernize.

WHY DID I GOT INTO CLIMATE CHANGE?

Failing to get admission to M. Phil. (Communication) in the University of Madras where I did M.A. (Communication), I acquired M.Phil. and Ph.D. in the discipline of Education, specializing in Educational Communication. In fact, my research was on the UGC Countrywide Classroom – incidentally, now I head one of the 17 media centres producing programmes for the UGC

Countrywide Classroom being telecast on Vyas Channel. My first book which Longman published was titled Television in Education. Going inter-disciplinary in the area of Educational Communication did give me a fillip.

Being a faculty member in Anna University, a premier technological university, I wanted to give a new direction to our university's media studies. We have the credit of being first in at least two respects: the first university in India to introduce M.Sc. (Electronic Media) programme; and the first university in India to start a community radio. Electronic Media academics are technologists by a vague dictionary definition of a 'technologist' – any user of technology too is a technologist. Just because we handle video camera which involves electronics we are technologists! Being part of a technological university, I wanted to go a bit deeper into technology. That is why I put forth a proposal before the Department of Science and Technology, Government of India, for a grant and facilitated the introduction of M.Sc. (Science and Technology Communication) in Anna University. My technological University is appreciative of my technological intervention as a media academic.

But I wanted to go beyond science communication, particularly in terms of research. Science communication research dabbles mainly with counting of percentage of science content in the media. This sort of research is not taken seriously by scientists and journalists for whom the research is primarily meant. On the other hand, climate change offers a vast opportunity for communication scholars. We at Anna University have introduced a paper 'Communicating Climate Change' for M.Sc. (Science and Technology Communication) and subsequently for M.Sc. (Electronic Media) for the first time in India. Also, we undertake research on communicating climate change.

Some of the activities we do are:

- (i) Conduct awareness creation workshops on climate change at the grassroots;
- (ii) Document the grassroots reality by visiting and talking to the people worst affected by climate change;
- (iii) Conduct workshops for journalists to engage the media on climate change;
- (iv) Do research in the mass media to find out hurdles in covering climate change.

All these are great contributions to the field of science and technology, though from the discipline of media studies which falls under the faculty of social sciences. Documenting grassroots perceptions on climate change is a significant contribution which scientists working on climate change would have to take note of. Such grassroots perceptions have to be scientifically verified and validated. Tools we use for research on communicating climate change are varied and are drawn from different disciplines: questionnaire, interview, focus group discussion, participant observation, content analysis, discourse analysis, visual ethnography,

ethnographic action research (EAR).

In spite of research in science communication for over two decades in India, we have not gone beyond deficit model, and to some extent, dialogue model and participation model. But communicating climate change as a new area of science communication offers much scope. Research in communicating climate change may not immediately see advances in theories and models but it will definitely render social useful data.

LIBERALIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Interestingly, liberalization ushered in the early 1990s has relegated development, but climate change has put development back on the agenda of the media. The concept of a level-playing field between the West and the East which is accepted in trade following liberalization is not valid in climate change discourse. So de-Westernization is possible in and required of climate change communication. If you wish to undertake development communication – both at practice and research – and still wish to be taken seriously in this post-liberalization era, climate change communication is a wonderful area.

Given the limitation of working as a media academic in a developing country, have field data as your strength if you cannot update related literature or be conceptually strong. The fact that liberalization has altered the media scene drastically means the old paradigms are no more relevant. Even the Frankfurt School's approach to the media has to be revisited in light of liberalization. If we cannot be theoretically strong, better be truthful and document the media reality as it is. This in itself is a great contribution to media research and de-Westernization of media research. Believe me, the best of the media scholars in the West may theorize well but they heavily depend on scholarship from developing countries when it comes to grassroots understanding of developing countries.

LESSONS LEARNT

Media research has to be society-centric, not media-centric. Tackling media issues among the less privileged is the best way to be society-centric and to de-Westernize.

Be strong in at least one discipline other than media – in my case, I specialize in the disciplines of climate change as well as education on an inter-disciplinary basis.

I would suggest to my fellow Ph.D. supervisors to take in Ph.D. candidates who have at least some field practice, as journalists or in any other capacity. If your student has field experience the questions he or she would frame for his or her research would not go off the

tangent. This is how most Western universities get things right.

Bridging of the urban-rural division is the first step towards de-Westernization. Climate change is one subject de-Westernization is felt and understood even by the Indian elite, and the urban-rural division vanishes in most climate change discourses. Climate change opens up opportunities to give a holistic orientation linking it with various sectors. Climate change communication is now the flagship of development communication, in an era when development has suffered a setback.

Should we go in for low-cost communication technological solutions, given the nature of underdevelopment in developing countries? To give an instance, even the best of technology like very high frequency (VHF) for disasters communication at the grassroots supported by the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) is sometimes in disarray for want of technical people locally to maintain the equipment.

Ask, does your research communicate beyond academics? What is the use if your research does not have much to say beyond your academic world? If you are doing a research in climate change communication, what is the use if your research does not add to the knowledge base in the field of climate change as well?

When you make such useful contributions by being systematic and studious in your empirical studies in the Indian context, your research will by default de-Westernize media research! This way, you keep off accusations of plagiarism in theoretical materials as well, and excel the West in originality.

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